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ABSTRACT

In order to study two aspects of the composing process, goal-setting and risk-taking, English and reading graduate students were given a set of readings on the topic of introspection and asked to write weekly papers in response. The papers were summaries, reaction statements, synthesis essays, and position papers, and students kept ongoing journals describing their responses and strategies in response to each task. When tasks were viewed as essentially purposeless (for example, writing summaries), the goals set were perfunctory and the commitment to the task drew on very low-level cognitive operations, but when the goals were stimulating, processes and responses were mobilized, leading to more reflective thinking. Analysis of one student's risk-taking revealed that the word "essay" instead of "paper" released her from constraints to produce what she believed the teacher wanted. The means must be sought, whether through task design or the atmosphere of acceptance created in the classroom, for fostering a willingness to explore one's own thinking and risk exposure of untested ideas. The dimensions of composing are complex and significantly influenced by the context of composing, the dimensions of which must be explored to create meaningful models of writing. (SRT)

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Introspective Accounts of Expository Writing

There are two major ways that accounts have been gathered in recent years of the composing process. The first is protocol analysis, described in several studies, first by Emig and then by Flower and Hayes, as the simultaneous report of cognitive processes with composing activities. The other major way has been through retrospective accounts such as the stimulated recall method reported by Mike Rose and others. I would like to describe a variation on the approach of retrospective accounts using journal accounts produced over a semester's time in response to a wide range of reading and writing activities and suggest why I believe this approach gives a fuller account of the varying factors that affect writing episodes.

Briefly, the context within which these reports were gathered is the following: a graduate seminar for English and reading graduate students at Indiana University in the spring of 1984 in which the students were initially given a set of readings on the topic of introspection and asked to write weekly papers in response. The papers were summaries, reaction statements, synthesis essays and position papers. The students kept ongoing journals describing their responses and strategies in response to each task. In the second half of the semester, the students selected topics of interest to themselves and wrote long research papers. They also kept journal accounts of their processes in undertaking this task. The class was

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team-taught by Professor Sharon Pugh of the Language Education Department and myself.

I believe that the reports gathered through the retrospective journal accounts are more natural than accounts gathered through protocol analysis because the retrospective reports capture reading and writing processes over time in the complex settings in which they actually occur. It thus seems appropriate to compare the views of composing generated through the retrospective journal reports with the cognitive processes model proposed by Flower and Hayes (1981) based on their protocol analysis reports. It would, of course, not be surprising to find many overlapping features. However, because of the nature of the tasks described in this study and the contexts within which they were performed, it would also not be surprising to find some differences. In their studies, Flower and Hayes did not base the writing tasks on reading materials, so their writers would not likely comment on incorporating immediate reading sources into their writing, although, of course, they could draw on previous information, some from prior reading, stored in their long-term memory.

A legitimate question arises as to whether these retrospective reports can be as valid as reports that are collected concurrently with an experience. Ericsson and Simon (1984) have noted that talk-alouds and think-alouds, what I am calling protocol analysis, attempt to report what is beeing heeded in short-term memory. Retrospective reports are more often based on long-term memory that is accessed by some event being noted in short-term memory. This point has several implications both positive and negative. From a negative perspective, this means that the accounts are more likely to be vulnerable to error and incompleteness. However, Ericsson and Simon believe that such reports are accessible because they are "a

subset of the originally heeded information in the form of a retrievable trace of connected episodic memory" (149). Furthermore, Ericsson and Simon do not believe that their incompleteness invalidates that which is reported. From a positive perspective, the retrospective accounts permit the triggering of associations from emotional and intellectual prior activities that do play important roles in the composing process, but are not retrieved in time-pressured and unnatural settings under which most protocol analysis reports are collected.

I would now like to compare some of the reports we received from our students with accounts reported in the literature that were gathered through protocol analysis. We would expect there to be many similarities, of course. But I would like to concentrate especially on those aspects of the composing process in the retrospective journal reports that do not emerge from protocol analysis accounts.

Flower and Hayes describe composing as a "goal-directed thinking process, guided by the writer's own growing network of goals" (366). They see these goals as consisting of both high-level and supporting sub-goals which may be changed or added to as the writing proceeds.

What Flower and Hayes refer to as goals, I call "purposes" in writing. One of the difficulties in our course was the purposelessness which many of the students felt about the assigned tasks. Because the writing tasks were all linked to some kind of reading activity, the students often felt restricted. This was truer of the initial summarizing tasks than the later reaction statements and synthesis papers. In the early summarizing tasks, viewed as requiring less complex thinking than tasks of analysis and synthesis on most taxonomies of cognitive complexity, the students suprised us by having difficulty with task definition (Sternglass and Pugh,

in press). First, the summarizing tasks were seen as artificial because the students had difficulty in locating both audiences and purposes. They pointed out that writing a formal summary of something they had read was not a meaningful activity for students at their level because it served no functional purpose. They customarily took notes from reading materials they were working with either in note-taking pages or directly on xeroxed copies of the materials they were working with. So, although the requirement to write a summary forced a deeper level of engagement with the source texts than might have developed if they had only been asked to read but not write anything, the form of the writing assignment was not satisfying. The students also grappled with what was "allowed" to be in a summary: Must it be controlled entirely by the information and the language of the text? Was any interpretation permitted? Another dilemma especially at first was that the materials were difficult for them to understand. One of the reading students, Garnet, acknowledged in class that she relied completely on the author's structure in one of the early assignments. In fact, she engaged in a strategy often employed by students who are uncertain that they have understood a complex text adequately. "I quoted it," she reported to her classmate's understanding laughter. The students were caught between two equally unattractive responses: a relatively rote recounting or an evaluation which they felt might not be allowed according to the definition of summary that many of them had made.

I have no intention of defending the design of these tasks, but I do hope that it is possible to learn something from responses to tasks in which students do not have a high degree of commitment. On those occasions, the goal-seeking need which Flower and Hays propose is subverted by the exigencies of the task conditions. Writers certainly construct goals so that

they can complete their assignments, but these goals are different than the kinds of goals writers would create under conditions of real need and interest. Flower and Hayes do not report on their informants complaining about the meaninglessness of the tasks they are engaged in, but the few excerpts they cite suggest no enthusiasm for the task at hand (usually a description of their job for a reader of Seventeen Magazine).

Because we had two types of tasks, those designed by the instructors, and those chosen by the students themselves, it is instructive to examine the students' comments when they compare their sense of purpose under these two conditions. Garnet, the student mentioned earlier, clearly articulated the contrast in her journal after she wrote summaries of two articles she had initially selected to begin her research on her self-selected topic:

> A comment about writing the summaries: These summaries were much easier for me to write and I felt that this was true because I was more familiar with the topic being discussed and because I had a 'real' purpose in summarizing them. I did not stop to think what was meant by a summary or wonder what the teachers were looking for. Instead I saw the activity as one that was helpful for me in gathering together some information that I could use later on in a paper. I was really surprised at how the change in purpose and context affected the ease with which I could write the summaries and attend to my own purposes rather than the teachers! There was not a debate about what I should write. I chose both the main points in the articles and the points that I was particularly interested in.

in this shift, the self-defined goals determine the response to the materials to meet the student's needs. Furthermore, Garnet points out that she is not distracted by having to figure out her instructors' goals and perhaps consciously or subconsciously subverting her own goals to those of others. It would be impossible to see this type of contrast if we did not have reports from students participating in a variety of types of tasks over time who had become accustomed to examining their own experiences and thus sensitized to reporting the differences in their experiences.

But even when selecting topics for themselves, the pragmatics of their lives heavily influenced and limited the choices the students could make. We had as participants in our study a group of advanced graduate students who were almost all near the end of their course work and thus very close to the selection of a dissertation topic. This exigency made itself felt for many of the students: Robin, a literature major minoring in composition, who selected a topic for an up-coming oral examination; Garnet, a reading education student, who needed to understand a particularly difficult concept (abduction) in preparation for writing her dissertation proposal; and most particularly, Crystal, another literature student minoring in composition, who had telescoped her course work into a frantic academic year and who had developed a carefully planned timetable for the completion of her degree. When she had to select her topic for her final paper, she pictured her decision-making process in her journal:

> My first inclination was to pick something that would be fun--I tossed around such things as Baroque music, TM, Italian Opera or some way to combine research with a creative paper. I know that I have to be practical, though, because I want to stick to the time schedule I've set for myself regarding this

> degree. Since I'll probably write a dissertation on _____'s poetry, therefore, I decided to pick a related topic for this paper. [This poem] is one of her important later works, and since I have't even read it yet, I thought it would qualify. Once I'd decided on [the poem] as the topic and a literary research paper as the project, I was perfectly happy with it, even excited about it because it would fit so well into my long-range plans.

Thus, it was not surprising that this project led Crystal into a succession of highs and lows as she worked on it. More than the completion of a paper for our course was at stake for her. She commented later, after a series of frustrating writing blocks, that if the project did not work out for her, she might not have a dissertation topic at all and this was extremely frightening. She felt in fact that her blocks were caused by her anxieties and she could face them only after she had resolved her difficulties with the paper (Sternglass and Pugh, in press).

As these few examples illustrate, the nature of goal-setting is a much more complex enterprise than simply taking the assignment a teacher hands you and trying to figure out how to respond to the needs of an audience. When the task is viewed as essentially purposeless, i.e. fulfilling an assignment, the goals that are set are perfunctory and the commitment to the task draws on very low-level cognitive operations (Sternglass, 1986). When the goals are energizing, processes and responses are mobilized that lead to more reflective thinking. Writing processes cannot be explored meaningfully under laboratory conditions where none of the important constraints that operate in real writing exist. All aspects of the writing process must be viewed in their larger context so that the multiple

influences that affect writing can be explored (Sternglass, in preparation).

I would like to mention briefly just one other element of the composing process that can be revealed through retrospective journal accounts that will likely never show up on protocol analysis accounts, and that is the issue of risk-taking in writing. Just one example from a student's experience in our course will illustrate this dimension.

The specific wording of the assignments often had effects upon the students' willingness to take risks beyond anything we could have anticipated. A particularly dramatic example of this is two opposite decisions made by the same student on two tasks. Garnet, who was cited earlier, as carefully "quoting" from source texts when she was not confident about her understanding, was quite conservative in her summary of a science-fiction story the students read as part of their reading material on introspection. She wrote in her journal,

> I did not feel that I had to draw an interpretation of the issues raised by the article to the topic of introspection although I knew that there were definitely some to make. Another reason I made this decision was that it was much less risky to try and stay more closely to the text and not put too much of my own interpretation of the article into the summary. I really was not too confident in how well I had really dealt with the issues the author thought he had raised in the article even though I knew that there was no way that I could get all of the author's text. Even though I accept the concept of multiple realities and therefore multiple reactions to a text, I still find myself anxious that I will not get the meaning the 'teacher'

> wanted me to. All of these thoughts (plus others I'm sure) led me to decide to stay closely to the actual text.

If such a sophisticated student as this feels so constrained to figure out and produce what she believes the teacher wants, we can only speculate with anguish about how less confident students' responses are shaped by these feelings.

Then, to our astonishment, this same student was sudenly liberated from all these constraints simply by her interpretation of the wording of the next assignment. When she looked at her notes to check the exact wording of this assignment, Garnet found they said

> 'synthesis essay' and this stopped me. Synthesis essay had a different meaning for me than synthesis paper although I can't really explain what I saw as the difference except that an essay seemed to be more open to reader interpretation and not as much of synthesis...As I glanced over the points I had made [in my notes], the transaction point stood out and I decided to stick my neck out and make that my synthesizing idea. The word essay allowed me to do that because it seemed to indicate risk-taking and my own thoughts...When I finished, I wasn't sure that I totally agreed with myself but felt it was an interesting argument and had been very productive for me in that it had helped me to take a different perspective of the article and so might also stimulate the thoughts of others about these articles even if they don't agree.

The little word "essay" had produced this massive shift in her willingness to explore her own thinking in a way far more productive than her previously restricted approaches had permitted. And, not only had her thinking been

liberated, but her writing process itself dramatically altered so that it came to resemble what Britton (1975) has called "impelled writing": "I have read authors who write about not knowing what's going to be written on the page until it's there and being surprised at what comes out in print and I had this sensation as I was writing this article. The line of reasoning I was pursuing seemed so productive at the time that I didn't really want to handle counterarguments until later (much later). It will be interesting to see if I still feel this way tomorrow when I reread the essay or if I feel it's junk." It is difficult to believe that this is the voice of the same writer who wanted carefully to protect herself so that she would come as close as possible to the "teacher's meaning." What this suggests, of course, is that we must search for the means, whether it be through the task design or the atmosphere of acceptance that we create in the classroom that will foster this willingness to explore one's own thinking and risk exposure of untested ideas.

The elements of risk-taking can never emerge from a model of the type that Flower and Hayes have proposed. It is an element of the writing process that the writer is unlikely to mention in a protocol report because it probably doesn't seem to fit with the exigencies of having to produce writing on demand. The expection is not only compliance but attention to the demands of the moment, i.e. producing the document. As Ericsson and Simon point out, protocol reports give us access to what the individual is attending to at the moment, and although that is certainly central to understanding what is going on, that does not necessarily mean that the report is complete in that the associations triggered in long-term memory may not be only substantive, but affective as well. We need to be aware of this dimension and its effect on the writing that is produced.

Although I have addressed only two aspects of the composing process, goal-setting and risk-taking, it is evident that the dimensions of composing are very complex and significantly influenced by the context of composing. Only when all the dimensions of the composing environment are explored and described can we begin to have meaningful models of writing.

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